

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine

Editor's Note: *In a story co-written on this website on April 28, 2013, with Julie Kumble of the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts, we observed that the percentage of women in the AVMA's House of Delegates is roughly equivalent to women in the United States Congress.¹ In this follow-up story, she examines more closely some aspects of women's leadership and the choices that women entering the field are making as they prepare their careers in a profession that is now becoming overwhelmingly female.*

Donald F. Smith.

By Julie Kumble (Guest Author)

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Most agree that more women are needed at top levels in the veterinary profession across the major areas of academia, organized veterinary medicine, industry and practice. Dr. Smith and I have been examining women's leadership in these areas through literature reviews and extensive interviews with women and men in the profession. These interviews have included four of the six female deans of the U.S. veterinary schools, past, current and incoming presidents of the AVMA, Executive Board and House of Delegate members, past and current presidents of state veterinary medical associations, industry leaders, practice owners and current veterinary students.

The emerging picture confirms that many in the profession care deeply and are striving to raise the numbers of women at leadership levels. This encouraging trend reflects the prevailing assumption that increasing women's leadership is important not just to mirror the demographics of the veterinary profession, which is approximately 52% female² and its aspiring student body approaching 80% female,³ but also to broaden perspectives, policies and practices that support the changing face of veterinary medicine.

Along with this movement toward women's leadership, it is essential to consider that women today have many choices in their lives and careers, choices that offer them the independence, work-life balance and degrees of leadership that they feel empowered to make for themselves. Some younger women are making choices that don't always result in conventionally-accepted leadership roles such as deans in academia, owners or partners in business, or elected representatives in the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)—all of which hover at around 20% for women.⁴ Nevertheless, they're making choices that meet their personal goals, and it's clear that more choices are available now than there once were, largely as a result of the work that women veterinarians and their supporters who came before them forged in a then male-dominated field.

Younger women have told us that their sense of empowerment and their definition of success is influenced by more than just striving to reach the top rung of the profession. Among the factors that

go into their definitions of success are: 1) timing related to if and when they decide to have children; 2) balance between work and family; and 3) balance between career goals and other goals in life according to the different stages of life. The student debt load certainly has an impact on these kinds of choices as does whether or not a woman is single or is part of a two-income partnership. However, the idea of choice underlying these issues is fundamental to their concept of success, if not leadership.

Dean Deborah Kochevar (Tufts University) expanded on this point in our recent interview:

“What’s interesting to me is that the women students in the last several years look at these ‘do it all’ models and say, ‘Why would anyone want to do that? I’m going to get my DVM and if I choose to work for ten years, then have children and then come back, I can do that.’ I think that’s a whole different sense of empowerment. People need to do what they feel makes a contribution and you never know at what level that contribution is going to come. It will be great if some of them step up and take leadership roles, and I think they are. But they’re realistic about how they want to balance their lives. I give them credit for making their own calls and not feeling pressured by having to prove something.”⁵



*Deborah Kochevar, DVM, PhD
Dean and Henry and Lois Foster Professor
Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University
(Photo provided by Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University)*

Dean Lisa K. Nolan (Iowa State University) added:

"I think that [it's important to help people understand] that they can live lives of impact but it probably involves some sacrifice along the way and they may want to think about that in a rational way and weigh some of their decisions in that context. 'Are you going to follow through and become a PhD? Are you going to be the best teacher you can, or whatever? Where do you want to have your impact? What sacrifices are you willing to make to do that?'"⁶



Lisa K. Nolan, DVM, PhD
Dr. Stephen G. Juelsgaard Dean of Veterinary Medicine
Iowa State University
(Photo provided by Dr. Katherine Logue)

For women who choose to pursue more direct paths to places of influence and leadership, formal and informal mentoring goes a long way to help them achieve their goals and to help open up options they'd never even considered. Virtually every one of our interviewees has reiterated the importance of mentoring in their lives. Dr. Nolan reflected on this point:

"Through every step of the way, I have been blessed with people who really knew what was better for me than I knew myself, or saw something to nurture that I was unaware of. Whether it was my major professor, Dick Wooley, and my first boss, Herb Smith, or then [Dean] John Thomson who kept clearing the way for different opportunities, I've been put in a lot of opportunities where I could have failed and had a lot of support in not failing."⁷

For women who want to pursue leadership positions in veterinary medicine, the barriers are more subtle than they once were. While blatant discrimination has largely become a thing of the past and glass ceilings are receding, it's essential to tease out the remaining systemic barriers. With room for debate, these barriers include the cost and time associated with House of Delegates and the Executive Board memberships at the AVMA, the prevalence of traditional sole-owner practices, poor

representation of women on industry boards, and poor or nonexistent paid family leave policies in private and public settings, to name a few.

One way to address these barriers is to have more women in leadership positions. Literature points to the concept of critical mass, an important tipping point when there is at least 30% of women in top decision making positions, resulting in, for example, better board governance and profitability.^{8,9} This translates well for the four major areas of the veterinary profession mentioned above, from academia to practice ownership. More women in leadership positions, indeed at the critical mass threshold, can help advocate for policies and practices that support women and families as they strive to achieve a balance between career and raising their children.

Mentoring women, addressing systemic barriers and striving to achieve a minimum of 30% women in top leadership positions, will go a long way to increasing women's leadership in veterinary medicine. And yet we must not overlook the fact that women's success comes in many different forms. Tapping the strengths of all kinds of women in the profession and those in all different stages of their careers will make the veterinary profession stronger and more dynamic.

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Julie Kumble

(Photo provided by Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts)

¹ Smith DF, Kumble J. Women's Leadership in the U.S. Congress and the AVMA's House of Delegates: Exploring Parallels and Looking Forward. <https://www.veritasdvm.com/veritasblog/womens-leadership-in-the-u-s-congress-and-the-avmas-house-of-delegates-exploring-parallels-and-looking-forward/#.UYPD26I3uUQ>

² <https://www.avma.org/KB/Resources/Statistics/Pages/Market-research-statistics-US-veterinarians.aspx>

³ 78.6% female, 2012-13;

<http://www.aavmc.org/data/images/research/aavmc%20data%20reports/2013%20aavmc%20public%20data%20as%20of%20march25.2013.pdf>

⁴ See Smith and Kumble, Reference 1 above.

⁵ Deborah Kochevar, DVM, PhD, Dean and Henry and Lois Foster Professor, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, interview 2013 April 8.

⁶ Lisa Nolan, DVM, PhD, Dr. Stephen G. Juelsgaard Dean, College of Veterinary Medicine, Iowa State University, interview 2013 Feb 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Kramer VW, Konrad AM, Erkut S. Critical Mass: Why three or more women on boards enhance governance. 2006, Wellesley Centers for Women.

⁹ The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards, Catalyst.org, October 15, 2007.

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